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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000762

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/25/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: IRANIAN AMBASSADOR SPEAKS OUT ON ETHNIC AZERI
DEMONSTRATIONS IN IRAN

REF: BAKU 758

Classified By: Acting DCM Joan Polaschik per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (U) The ongoing demonstrations by ethnic Azeris in Iran and reports of more police violence, deaths, and arrests continue to generate headlines and intense interest in Azerbaijan (ref a). Iranian Ambassador Afshar Suleymani (an ethnic Azeri himself) held a press conference on May 24 in which he acknowledged the outrage by Iranian Azeris and criticized the newspaper that had published the offensive cartoon, but suggested that &external forces8 were taking advantage of the situation to provoke unrest and weaken Iran.

He defended the use of force by the police, but denied local press reports that police had fired on the protesters and that some of them had been killed. (Note: The Azerbaijani press has carried reports of more violence today.) Suleymani accused the United States of provoking the demonstrations and organizing a local demonstration in front of the Iranian embassy in Baku, in which the Iranian flag was burned. (Police have dispersed small demonstrations in front of the Iranian Embassy each of the last two days and, according to our human rights contacts, have detained a few of the protesters.)

¶2. (C) Comment: Suleymani is a colorful, active figure in Baku. Fluent in Azeri, he gives regular interviews and has had good relations with the local press in the past. Some months ago, however, Suleymani provoked a diplomatic flap and a very public torrent of criticism when he accused the Government of Azerbaijan of supporting the reunification of &northern8 and &southern8 Azerbaijan. (&In your dreams!8 was the phrase he used to dismiss the possibility of reunification.) His strongly worded criticism of the Government of Azerbaijan also provoked a rare public rebuke of Iran from Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry (ref b). The Government of Azerbaijan undoubtedly is watching Suleymani's response to the current demonstrations very carefully.

HYLAND